

Information and communication technology environments in Melanesia are changing rapidly and profoundly (Logan 2014). Certainly, mobile phones and social media were used to great effect in the 2012 Papua New Guinea elections. In this, the second in a series of *In Briefs* outlining the findings of the 2014 Solomon Islands Election Observation led by the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program (SSGM) and the Centre for Democratic Institutions (Haley and Zubrinich 2015), we present new data concerning the use of mobile phones during the elections.

Telecommunications in Solomon Islands have improved greatly since the 2010 elections. The mobile phone network now covers approximately 60% of the country, while mobile phone penetration is over 50% (Logan 2014). Observers in 11 of the 12 constituencies surveyed felt that mobile phones had a significant impact on the 2014 election. The exception was East Guadalcanal, where coverage is limited and telecommunications infrastructure weak.

Mobile phones were widely used to deliver information about the voter registration process; to share information about the election; to contact polling officials; to source information about the time and location of campaign events; and, in Honiara, to confirm voter registration details. On the other hand, observers also noted the use of mobile phones to influence voters, to intimidate voters, to facilitate gifting and vote buying, to mobilise support, to distract polling officials, to spread misinformation about particular candidates, to report back to candidates and to coordinate post-voting festivities. Importantly, no major network outages were noted during the polling or counting periods.

## Ownership and Coverage

As part of the observation we investigated the manner in which mobile phone use affected the 2014 election. We did this in two ways: first by

including a number of questions in the pre-poll citizen survey concerning mobile phone ownership and usage, and second by asking observers a series of questions pertaining to the way mobile phones were used during the elections.

Two-thirds (66%) of the 1332 pre-poll respondents reported owning a mobile phone, and a further 8% of respondents reported having regular access to one. Of the 977 respondents with a mobile phone or access to one, 73% had received credit during the campaign period. Of these, 6% had received credit from a candidate, 19% from a friend and 48% from a family member. Fifty-five per cent of all respondents, and 75% of those with a phone or access to one, reported having shared information about the election via mobile phone, while 17% reported being contacted by phone by a candidate or their agent during the campaign period. Observers also noted candidates and agents often carried multiple phones.

In every constituency surveyed there were voters who had been contacted by phone, by a candidate or by a candidate agent during the campaign period, although there was significant variation between constituencies. For example, in Central Makira only 3% of citizens surveyed had been contacted by a candidate or their agent by mobile phone, whereas 37% of respondents in Aoke Langalanga (Malaita Province) had. One might be tempted to conclude that mobile coverage is poor in Central Makira, but 62% of those surveyed in that constituency reported receiving Solomon Islands Electoral Commission (SIEC) awareness messages by phone, suggesting differences in campaign strategies rather than poor coverage.

## Awareness

The national awareness campaign for the 2014 elections was delivered principally by the SIEC. Awareness concerning both the new Biometric Voter Registration system (which enabled the SIEC to identify duplicate enrolments using facial

recognition software) and the voting process was noted in every constituency surveyed, with more awareness carried out in 2014 than 2010. Only 8% of citizens surveyed reported not being exposed to any awareness in the lead-up to the election or during the voter registration exercise. The SIEC media and voter awareness campaign was multifaceted, involving radio, print media, television advertisements and bulk text messaging via mobile phone. Overall, 53% of those surveyed reported having attended face-to-face voter awareness activities.

Mobile phones were used to great effect by the SIEC to deliver information about the election and the voter registration process that preceded it, with 59% of respondents with mobile phones reporting having received election-related text messages. Upwards of one-third of respondents in each constituency, save East Guadalcanal and West Are'Are, received SIEC's bulk text messages. Importantly, 40% of those who did not attend face-to-face awareness activities received SIEC messages via mobile phone. There was no apparent gender bias with respect to exposure to awareness activities.

### Mobile Phone Uses

As noted at the outset, mobile phones were used for a range of beneficial purposes. The most commonly cited among these was improved election awareness. Close to one-third of all observers (31%) noted that mobile phones were a critical component of the awareness campaign. Electoral and security personnel in the field also relied heavily on mobile phones and did not appear to experience difficulty communicating with each other or with headquarters. Conversely, observers also noted the use of mobile phones to influence and intimidate voters and for other negative means. In both East Honiara and Central Honiara, angry candidates swooped upon polling stations after being alerted by phone to irregularities and/or emergent issues.

At a number of locations, citizens were observed taking photographs and video recordings on smartphones at rallies, campaign events and polling stations. The use of mobile phones at

campaign events and on polling day may well contribute to greater accountability as citizens were seen recording both campaign promises made by candidates and voting irregularities. This is particularly noteworthy in view of the fact that the Gumine Open election result from the 2012 Papua New Guinea national elections was declared null and void on the basis of mobile phone footage confirming voting irregularities (Haley 2014). In addition, mobile phones may enable a range of new intimidatory tactics as witnessed in the 2012 Papua New Guinea national elections (ibid.). Observers in Honiara, Malaita and Isabel provinces, for example, reported the use of mobile phones to facilitate block voting, with one observer reporting that she saw people waiting to vote receive text messages that contained a photograph indicating which candidate symbol to mark.

### Conclusion

There can be no doubt that mobile phones have had a profound effect on and will continue to influence the conduct of elections in Solomon Islands into the foreseeable future. Building on the successful use of mobile phones as part of the nationwide awareness campaign around the Biometric Voter Registration system and in the lead-up to the election, the SIEC is encouraged to explore the feasibility of extending the use of this technology to other parts of the electoral process, such as a mobile phone service to check voter registration details.

### Author Notes

*Nicole Haley is convenor of SSGM. Kerry Zubrinich is a research fellow at SSGM. Together they have undertaken seven collaborative research projects over the past five years.*

### References

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